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The Future of Archival History

James O'Toole

More than a dozen years ago, the archival educator and writer Richard Cox outlined the development of American archival history and offered some suggestions for the work that still needed to be done in that field.¹ Drawing on a range of publications, from the obscure to the well-known, he surveyed a century of writing in this country on the history of the archives profession, its people, and its institutions, as that history had appeared in monographs and in scholarly journals of state, regional, and national circulation. For all the output, however, Cox concluded that the coverage was uneven in terms of quantity and quality, a "truly lamentable" situation that left us as archivists with virtually everything yet to be known about the history and meaning of what we do. It is no less ironic today than it was then that a profession that likes to remind itself and its

¹ Richard J. Cox, "American Archival History: Its Development, Needs, and Opportunities," *American Archivist* 46 (Winter 1983): 31-41.

constituents that the past is prologue has done so little in the way of looking into its own prologue. It is surely not possible to remedy that lack entirely, but it is still useful to consider where we are with archival history at the moment and to speculate on where our study of this subject might go in the future.

My starting presumption is that archival history is indeed a valuable and worthwhile subject for exploration. I feel compelled to say that because, in this curiously anti-intellectual profession of ours, you never know how people will react if you dare to propose that it might be worthwhile to spend some time every now and then thinking about matters beyond purely practical questions of arrangement, description, conservation treatment, and the finer points of the 541 field of the MARC format. The naysayers complain with inexplicable delight that all this talk of larger issues, of the nature and meaning of archives, or of archival theory is just an acute case of status anxiety; it is an effort by archivists to make what they do sound more important than it is or ever can be. We need some reflection on why this apparent self-hatred is as widespread as it is, both in print and in cyberspace—but that is a topic for another day. Meantime, let us agree that the study of archival history, like the study of any history, has value, that it enlightens the present and its work by reminding us that things have not always been the way they are today, that other options have been possible, that change is a fundamental feature of any human activity through time. The past may indeed be a foreign country where they do things differently, but foreign travel has always been educational and useful. More to the point, exploring the changes that have already taken place

in our profession will, we hope, put the changes we see around us today in a new, less threatening perspective, and that must surely be the first step toward dealing with those challenges successfully.² What I propose to do here is threefold: to review some themes in the study of archival history that has been done to date; to offer some broad outlines of the kind of archival history that we ought to undertake in the future; and to suggest some methodological approaches we ought to use in getting from here to there.

I have done an impressionistic rather than a systematic review of the work available in archival history (for a more systematic summary, see Cox's characteristically thorough footnotes), going back through the principal professional journals in North America to see what sorts of things have been published in this field; I have also reexamined the limited monographic output in archival history. Before exploring the themes represented in this literature, we should note first that our attention to archival history has been sporadic and mercurial. Reading through the journals leads one to conclude that surges of interest are always followed by long periods in which little work is apparently being done. Interestingly enough, the topic came early to

² For more on these questions, see Richard J. Cox, "On the Value of Archival History in the United States," *Libraries and Culture* 23 (Spring 1988): 135-151; this essay also appears as chapter eight of Cox's *American Archival Analysis: The Recent Development of the Archival Profession in the United States* (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1990).

the pages of the *American Archivist*, with an essay in its second volume (April 1939) on the history of archival literature in Europe.³ Thereafter, however, spurts of interest have always been more than matched by fallow times.

Nevertheless, there are some broad areas where our work has focused. There is quite a lot, for instance, on the history of certain types of archival institutions and on particular repositories, collections, and even individual documents. These emphases should not surprise us, for this is the easiest kind of archival history for archival practitioners to write. All archivists necessarily develop some sense of the history of their own repositories just by working there, and the collections that have interesting or illustrative histories are right there in front of them on the shelves. Thus, for example, histories of academic archives, of the archives of particular states and religious denominations, and of important repositories such as the US National Archives, the Library of Congress, and the Public Archives of Canada have joined studies of the succession of owners of the Thomas Jefferson papers, the travels of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the repatriation of specific collections, and the forgery of certain manuscript items.⁴ Similarly, we have had

³ Olga P. Palmer, "The History of European Archival Literature," *American Archivist* 2 (April 1939): 69-84.

⁴ J. Frank Cook, "Academic Archives and the SAA, 1938-1979: From Arcana Siwash to the C&U PAG," *American Archivist* 51 (Fall 1988): 428-439; Henry J. Browne, "The American Catholic Archival Tradition," *American*
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some explorations of notable chapters in the history of the organized profession: the establishment of a distinct professional society for archivists, our changing approaches to education and training, and wider efforts such as the

⁴(...continued)

Archivist 14 (April 1951): 127-140; Fred Shelley, "Manuscripts in the Library of Congress, 1800-1900," *American Archivist* 11 (January 1948): 3-19; Donald R. McCoy, "The Crucial Choice: The Appointment of R. D. W. Connor as Archivist of the United States," *American Archivist* 37 (July 1974): 399-413; Ian Wilson, "A Noble Dream': The Origins of the Public Archives of Canada," *Archivaria* 15 (Winter 1982-1983): 16-35; William G. Ormsby, "The Public Archives of Canada, 1948-1968," *Archivaria* 15 (Winter 1982-1983): 36-46; Bruce G. Wilson, "Bringing Home Canada's Archival Heritage: The London Office of the Public Archives of Canada, 1872-1986," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985-1986): 28-42; Paul G. Sifton, "The Provenance of the Thomas Jefferson Papers," *American Archivist* 40 (January 1977): 17-30; Milton O. Gustafson, "The Empty Shrine: The Transfer of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to the National Archives," *American Archivist* 39 (July 1976): 271-285; Edward F. Rowse, "The Archives of New York," *American Archivist* 4 (October 1941): 267-274; Harriet Smither, "The Archives of Texas," *American Archivist* 3 (July 1940): 187-200; R. H. Woody, "The Public Records of South Carolina," *American Archivist* 2 (October 1939): 244-263; Valerie Komor, "In Search of Archival History: Eugenio Casanova and the Suspect Lincoln Letter," *Archival Issues* 18 (1993): 55-61; Dorothy Twohig, "George Washington Forgeries and Facsimiles," *Provenance* 1 (Fall 1983): 1-13.

Historical Records Survey of the 1930s and 1940s.⁵ While archival history of this kind still has value, those who undertake such studies in the future might approach the subject looking for the larger meanings and wider applications of the particular stories they have to tell. A simple multiplication of how-we-did-it-good — or bad — histories will be less useful than more broadly based

⁵ William F. Birdsall, "The Two Sides of the Desk: The Archivist and the Historian, 1909-1935," *American Archivist* 38 (April 1975): 159-173; Gifford Leland, "The First Conference of Archivists, December 1909: The Beginnings of a Profession," *American Archivist* 13 (April 1950): 109-120; Mattie U. Russell, "The Influence of Historians on the Archival Profession in the United States," *American Archivist* 46 (Summer 1983): 273-285; J. Frank Cook, "The Blessings of Providence on an Association of Archivists," *American Archivist* 46 (Fall 1983): 374-399; Leonard Rapport, "Dumped From a Wharf into Casco Bay: The Historical Records Survey Revisited," *American Archivist* 37 (April 1974): 201-210; Trudy Huskamp Peterson, "The Iowa Historical Records Survey, 1936-1942," *American Archivist* 37 (April 1974): 223-246; Chester W. Bowie, "The Historical Records Survey in Wisconsin," *American Archivist* 37 (April 1974): 247-261; Loretta Hefner, comp., *The WPA Historical Records Survey: A Guide to the Unpublished Inventories, Indexes, and Transcripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980); Luke J. Gilliland-Swetland, "The Provenance of a Profession: The Permanence of the Public Archives and Historical Manuscripts Tradition in American Archival History," *American Archivist* 54 (Summer 1991): 160-175; Jacqueline, "That We Shall Truly Deserve the Title of 'Profession': The Training and Education of Archivists, 1930-1960," *American Archivist* 47 (Summer 1984): 243-254.

attempts to understand the larger contexts of particular cases. In what kinds of repositories has the locus of intellectual energy in the profession been focused at different periods, for instance, and how has the treatment of specific collections or documents provided models for the caretakers of others? What was the process by which National Archives inventories and Library of Congress registers came to be adopted as the preferred descriptive methods in other repositories? What did the planners and workers of the Historical Records Survey, nationally and in the several states, think they were doing, who did they think they were doing it for, and what did they hope the larger applicability of their work would be?

If there have been some good studies of repositories, collections, and professional activities, we have also had several treatments of individual archivists. In the study of archival biography, less well known names have received attention along with their more famous colleagues. Richard Bartlett of New Hampshire, a nineteenth century "minor prophet" of the preservation of public records, and J. S. Matthews, an advocate for archives in Vancouver, British Columbia, for instance, have their place alongside such better known names as Posner, Schellenberg, Jameson, and Leland⁶. There are biases in our coverage of archival

⁶ Richard G. Wood, "Richard Bartlett: Minor Archival Prophet," *American Archivist* 17 (January 1954): 13-18; Robin Kierstead, "J. S. Matthews and an Archives for Vancouver, 1951-1972," *Archivaria* 23 (Winter 1986-1987): 86-106; Fred Shelley, "The Interest of J. Franklin Jameson (continued...)"

biography, of course, and these should not surprise us. Like much biography in general, archival biography has focused almost exclusively on great white men. There is but a single treatment of the role of women in the American archival profession—not even Margaret Cross Norton has been the subject of a biography of her own, though the introduction to Thornton Mitchell's 1975 collection of her essays partially fills that gap—and only one biography of an African American, the pioneer historian and preserver of archival records, Carter Woodson.⁷ Given these gaps in the

⁶(...continued)

in the National Archives, 1908-1934," *American Archivist* 12 (April 1949): 99-130; Jane F. Smith, "Theodore R. Schellenberg: Americanizer and Popularizer," *American Archivist* 44 (Fall 1981): 313-326; Rodney A. Ross, "Ernst Posner: The Bridge Between the Old World and the New," *American Archivist* 44 (Fall 1981): 304-312; Rodney A. Ross, "Waldo Gifford Leland: Archivist by Association," *American Archivist* 46 (Summer 1983): 264-276; Victor Gondos, *J. Franklin Jameson and the Birth of the National Archives, 1906-1926* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981). Schellenberg will be included in the massive *American National Biography* volumes, forthcoming from Oxford University Press and intended as a replacement for the *Dictionary of American Biography*, but only because I wrote them and told them I thought he should be in there. They rejected my suggestion that Posner deserved an entry too.

⁷ Michele F. Pacfico, "Founding Mothers: Women in the Society of American Archivists, 1936-1972," *American Archivist* 50 (Summer 1987): 370-389; Thornton W. Mitchell, (continued...)

coverage, the agenda for archival biography in the future seems pretty obvious.

There has been an encouraging amount of work in the history of recordkeeping practices, but here again it has been too scattered and particular in its focus. Several useful studies of federal government records practice, especially in the important area of records disposal, have appeared over the years, though there has not been comparable attention paid to the origins and history of recordkeeping practice at the state or provincial levels.⁸

⁷(...continued)

ed., *Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival and Records Management* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1975); Jacqueline Goggin, "Carter G. Woodson and the Collection of Source Materials for Afro-American History," *American Archivist* 48 (Summer 1985): 261-271.

⁸ Harold T. Pinkett, "Investigations of Federal Recordkeeping, 1887-1906," *American Archivist* 21 (April 1958): 163-194; Henry F. Beers, "Historical Development of the Records Disposal Policy of the Federal Government Prior to 1934," *American Archivist* 7 (July 1944): 181-201; James G. Bradsher, "An Administrative History of the Disposal of Federal Records, 1789-1949," *Provenance* 3 (Fall 1985): 1-21, and "An Administrative History of the Disposal of Federal Records, 1950-1985," *Provenance* 4 (Fall 1986): 49-73; Richard J. Cox, "Public Records in Colonial Maryland," *American Archivist* 37 (April 1974): 263-275; Morris L. Radoff, "The Maryland Records in the Revolutionary War," *American Archivist* 37 (April 1974): 277-285; Richard J. Cox, "The Plight of American Municipal
(continued...)"

Recently, some studies have looked at the functions of records and recordkeeping in particular bureaucratic settings, much of this work informed by historical studies of the development of modern business and other organizations.⁹

These latter approaches seem to me to offer the most promise for the future, and I think Peter Wosh's study of recordkeeping at the American Bible Society is the best example for others to follow when looking at particular institutions or kinds of institutions. He charted how

⁸(...continued)

Archives: Baltimore, 1729-1979," *American Archivist* 42 (July 1979): 281-292; Richard J. Cox, "Need for Comprehensive Records Programs in Local Government: Baltimore, 1947-1982," *Provenance* 1 (Fall 1983): 14-34.

⁹ Peter J. Wosh, "Bibles, Benevolence, and Bureaucracy: The Changing Nature of Nineteenth Century Religious Records," *American Archivist* 52 (Spring 1989): 166-178; see also Wosh's *Spreading the Word: The Bible Business in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); JoAnne Yates, "Internal Communication Systems in American Business: A Framework to Aid Appraisal," *American Archivist* 48 (April 1985): 141-158; JoAnne Yates, *Control Through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977); Michael A. Lutzger, "Max Weber and the Analysis of Modern Bureaucratic Organizations: Notes Toward a Theory of Appraisal," *American Archivist* 45 (Spring 1982): 119-130.

recordkeeping requirements and practices changed as the Bible Society grew from a small religious mission in which workers were friends exchanging personal letters about their work into a highly articulated agency that wanted detailed statistical reports at specified times, including specified types of data. In this way, he has provided a useful framework for understanding the central questions of how records and information move around in organizations and in life, and therefore of what changes and practices in that area may tell us about the records themselves.

If there have been some studies of recordkeeping, there have been surprisingly few histories of the "stuff" of archives itself—paper, ink, writing implements—and its changing technology. The kinds of records produced in any historical period and thus the kinds of archives that survive are always dependent on the materials and techniques available for capturing and preserving information. One might think that, worrying as they do about changes occurring around them, archivists would be eager to learn from the history of similar changes in the past: surely, this would be the most "relevant" and fundamentally practical kind of history they could undertake. There are only a handful of writings in the archival literature on this subject, however, but fortunately models from broader historical studies are also available.¹⁰ Henri-Jean

¹⁰ William J. Barrow, "Black Writing Ink of the Colonial Period," *American Archivist* 11 (October 1948): 291-307; Victor Gondos, "The Era of the Woodruff File," *American Archivist* 19 (October 1956): 303-320; Laetitia Yeandle, "The
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Martin's recently translated *History and Power of Writing*, for example, necessarily devotes attention to these questions. Other works, such as the archival cult-classic of Michael Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record* (now out in a revised and expanded edition), are also useful in this regard.¹¹ There should be more studies of the kinds of paper and books in use at various times in our history, more studies of copying techniques, of writing implements, of the development of certain kinds of forms, of typewriters and carbon paper and what used to be called "NCR paper," of filing cabinets and storage equipment, of computer hardware and software, of sound and video recording equipment. Many archivists have such materials in their collections, and they could surely profit from knowing where it all came from.

Three other areas of archival history have received especially spotty and incomplete treatment. First, the study

¹⁰(...continued)

Evolution of Handwriting in the English-speaking Colonies of America," *American Archivist* 43 (Summer 1980): 294-311; Maygene Daniels, "The Ingenious Pen: American Writing Implements from the Eighteenth Century to the Twentieth," *American Archivist* 43 (Summer 1980): 312-324; see also Henry Petroski, *The Pencil: A History of Design and Circumstance* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

¹¹ Henri-Jean Martin, *The History and Power of Writing*, translated by Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066-1307*, second ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993).

of archives in particular times and places has been wide-ranging, but what has appeared only helps call attention to what is not there. The coverage is varied: ancient Greece and Rome, medieval and early modern Europe, landmarks of archival legislation and archival literature, and of course that glorious chapter in American history, the Texas Archives War of 1842.¹² These are all fine as far as they

¹² Ernst Posner, "The Athenian Cavalry Archives of the Fourth and Third Centuries BC," *American Archivist* 37 (April 1974): 579-582; James M. O'Toole, "Herodotus and the Written Record," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-1992): 148-160; Phyllis Culham, "Tablets and Temples: Documents in Republican Rome," *Provenance* 2 (Fall 1984): 15-31; M. T. Clanchy, "'Tenacious Letters': Archives and Memory in the Middle Ages," *Archivaria* 11 (Winter 1980-1981): 115-125; Ernst Posner, "Some Aspects of Archival Developments Since the French Revolution," *American Archivist* 3 (July 1940): 159-172; Carl Lokke, "Archives and the French Revolution," *American Archivist* 31 (January 1968): 23-32; Patricia Kennedy Grimstead, "Lenin's Archival Decree: The Bolshevik Legacy for Soviet Archival Theory and Practice," *American Archivist* 45 (Fall 1982): 429-443; Wilma MacDonald, "Keeping Safely the Public Records: The PRO Act of 1838," *Archivaria* 28 (Summer 1989): 151-154; Richard J. Cox, "American Archival Literature: Expanding Horizons and Continuing Needs, 1901-1987," *American Archivist* 50 (Summer 1987): 306-323; Robert D. Reynolds, "The Incunabula of Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: J. C. Fitzpatrick's *Notes on the Care, Cataloging, Calendaring, and Arranging of Manuscripts* and the Public Archives Commission's Uncompleted "Primer of Archival Economy"," *American* (continued...)

go, but there is virtually everything yet to be done in this area: pick your historical time and place, and get to work. Such massively learned treatments as Lawrence McCrank's study of archives in medieval Spain point the way to the kind of work that can and should be done.¹³ Second, we should note the irony that archivists have shown almost no interest in publishing and making available even their most important primary sources. Key texts in archival history almost never appear, and when a document pertaining to the history of the profession is published, the point has almost always been a whimsical rather than a scholarly one. Thus, while the *American Archivist* did publish a translation of Baldassare Bonifacio's *De Archivis* as early as 1941, the more common treatment of what might be called the archives of archives has been, unfortunately, a good deal sillier: reproductions of James A. Garfield's trying his hand at a typewriter in 1875 (with predictably amateurish results) and the letter from a ten-year-old Fidel Castro to Franklin

¹²(...continued)

Archivist 54 (Fall 1991): 466-482; Dorman H. Winfrey, "The Archives Wars in Texas," *American Archivist* 23 (October 1960): 431-437; David B. Gracy II, "Our Future is Now," *American Archivist* 48 (Winter 1985): 12-21.

¹³ Lawrence J. McCrank, "Documenting Reconquest and Reform: The Growth of Archives in the Medieval Crown of Aragon," *American Archivist* 56 (Spring 1993): 256-318; see also McCrank's *Discovery in the Archives of Spain and Portugal: Quincentenary Essays, 1492-1992* (New York: Haworth Press, 1993).

Roosevelt in 1940, asking for \$10.¹⁴ Finally, there are only a few reminiscences of archivists. Bob Warner's recently published memoirs of the independence struggle of the National Archives, for instance, are a cautionary and ultimately sad reminder of how hopeful we all were then. Recollections are not the most reliable accounts of archival history, of course, but like SAA's own oral history program, they have their place as additions to the primary sources of archival history.¹⁵

The most important hole in our treatment of archival history is in what we might think of as the intellectual history of archives. Our professional literature largely gives the impression that ideas about how archivists should approach their work simply do not have much of a history: our methods of appraisal, arrangement, description, and reference services would all appear to have sprung fully

¹⁴ Lester K. Born, "Baldassare Bonifacio and His Essay *De Archivis*," *American Archivist* 4 (October 1941): 221-237; "Garfield Tries the 'Type-Writer,'" *American Archivist* 24 (July 1961): 288; "From the Archives," *American Archivist* 50 (Spring 1987): 284-288.

¹⁵ Philip C. Brooks, "The First Decade of the Society of American Archivists," *American Archivist* 10 (April 1947): 115-128; H. G. Jones, "The Pink Elephant Revisited," *American Archivist* 43 (Fall 1980): 473-483; Patrick M. Quinn, "The Midwest Archives Conference: A Rich History Revisited," *Archival Issues* 18 (1993): 5-13; Robert M. Warner, *Diary of a Dream: A History of the National Archives Independence Movement, 1980-1985* (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1995).

formed from the brow of Zeus, and from that day until our own "we've always done it this way." We know, of course, that that is not so, but only rarely have we explored the changing understandings archivists have brought to their work. Taking arrangement as an example. Maynard Brichford has provided a useful introduction to the "provenance of provenance," but the earlier arrangement schemes and abandoned options remain largely unknown; so does the question of what archival repositories went through in converting from whatever came before provenance and original order as guiding principles.¹⁶

¹⁶ Maynard Brichford, "The Provenance of Provenance in Germanic Areas," *Provenance* 7 (Fall 1989): 54-70; Michael Roper, "The Development of the Principles of Provenance and Respect for Original Order in the Public Record Office," *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor*, ed. by Barbara L. Craig (Ottawa: Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992), 134-153; Mabel E. Deutrich, "Decimal Filing: Its General Background and an Account of Its Rise and Fall in the U. S. War Department," *American Archivist* 28 (April 1965): 199-218; Frank B. Evans, "Modern Methods of Arrangement of Archives in the United States," *American Archivist* 29 (April 1966): 241-264. We have had only a little work, much of it derivative, on the differences of so-called public archives and historical manuscripts traditions: Richard C. Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983); James M. O'Toole, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990), ch. 2; and Gilliland-Swetland, "Provenance of a Profession," *American Archivist* 54 (Summer 1991): 160-175.

Serious work on the history of the whole idea of appraisal—when and how did archivists come to think that the most important thing they do is throw things away, and how did that notion gain currency, if indeed it has?—remains to be done, and only recently have we had some contributions toward the history of descriptive practice.¹⁷ These are areas in which one would expect more work from our relentlessly practical profession, and the work would surely pay off. As we think about the nature of archival description in the future, as well as in the present, with Internet and World Wide Web descriptions largely replacing the detailed scholarly finding aid, should we not know something about how we got to the finding aid in the first place?

As archivists undertake these specific historical studies in the future, they should try to maintain a broader focus. All historians face the problem of drawing general conclusions from particular cases. When we study any historical subject we have to be concerned about whether it was representative or not, typical or atypical, an example of a common and widespread phenomenon or an exception that may or may not prove a rule. All those studies of colonial New England towns which were produced in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, were worthwhile historical enterprises, but interest in them has fallen off in recent years

¹⁷ Richard J. Cox outlines some of the recent history of appraisal in his "The Documentation Strategy and Archival Appraisal Principles: A Different Perspective," *Archivaria* 38 (Fall 1994): 11-36; on description see Luciana Duranti, "Origin and Development of the Concept of Archival Description," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993): 47-54.

because generalization seemed so difficult and was rarely attempted. Their authors, as one reviewer noted, too seldom addressed the most important question any historian can ask: "so what?"¹⁸ What did it all mean? "If Dedham had been Sudbury, it would have been different"?

In the words of the great philosopher, Peggy Lee: is that all there is?

Future archival history has to address this problem of generalization more seriously. As we look at any given topic—the history of recordkeeping practice, the history of archival theory and practice, the biography of individual archivists, the history of archives in specific historical settings—we have to keep this "so what?" question before us; we have to know whether we are looking at rules or exceptions. The way to do that is to approach archival history as an attempt to delineate aspects of the broad, cultural significance of recordmaking and recordkeeping, what Barbara Craig has perceptively called "the ecology of records."¹⁹ There are some good models for this quest. Though it has found an enthusiastic audience among archivists, Clanchy's work, for instance, is not about archival history as such; he has larger aims in view, namely, the "development of literate ways of thinking and of doing business" and the processes by which societies come to

¹⁸ Douglas Greenberg, "Our Town," *Reviews in American History* 9 (1981): 454-458.

¹⁹ Barbara L. Craig, "Outward Visions, Inward Glances: Archives History and Professional Identity," *Archival Issues* 17 (1992): 113-124.

rely on written documentation in a variety of forms. Among archivists, only Hugh Taylor and his disciples have tried to take this approach.²⁰ Similarly, Richard Brown's *Knowledge is Power* seeks to describe how information moves through society and how those who have it use information to separate themselves from those who do not.²¹ Regardless of the particular phenomena we investigate, we should look on archival history as part of this kind of effort to understand the underlying questions about what we do and why it needs doing. Frank Burke posed some of these questions long ago—why are there archival records in the first place? why do humans make records and, at least today, make them so abundantly? why do at least some people value their preservation? what are the practical and not-so-practical motivations, the immediate and more distant purposes for recordmaking?—and we have barely begun to look for answers to them.²² A broad cultural approach to archival history and its meaning will take us in the right direction.

²⁰ Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 1; see also Hugh A. Taylor, "My Very Act and Deed': Some Reflections on the Role of Textual Records in the Conduct of Affairs," *American Archivist* 51 (Fall 1988): 456-469.

²¹ Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

²² Frank G. Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1981): 40-46.

In order to get there, we need to be concerned about two questions of method. In particular, we have to avoid two methodological traps. The first is the necessity of avoiding the "Whig" approach to archival history. Those who have had some graduate training in history have probably encountered in one form or another Herbert Butterfield's classic, *The Whig Interpretation of History*.²³ Butterfield warned his fellow historians to resist the impulse to look on the past merely as a glorification of and justification for the present. He was arguing against the unconscious disposition to think that whatever in the past could be seen as prefiguring or helping to bring about the present—whether the Whig party in England or, in our case, methods for organizing and cataloging records in ancient Babylon—was good, and whatever impeded that ineluctable "progress" toward today and us was bad. Avoiding this pitfall is all the more important because it is so very tempting, and we have seen it in practice in archival history. The classicist Rosalind Thomas has recently criticized no less a figure than Ernst Posner on just this score, arguing that his *Archives in the Ancient World* (1972) was an essentially anachronistic effort to find historical antecedents for twentieth-century archival theory and practice. In contrast to Posner, she maintains, the recordmaking and recordkeeping processes of the ancient world were not fundamentally the same as those of modern society. They were decidedly unbureaucratic—Sparta kept almost no official records at all, while in Athens the public, monumental

²³ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1931).

display rather than the administrative use of records suggests the absence of what Thomas calls an identifiable "archives mentality"—and they evince an entirely different relationship among people, institutions, and records than the one we know. Posner, she says, seriously distorts the historical reality when he presents the records of pharaonic Egypt as being effectively the same as the records of the modern state—the correct parallel is with presidential libraries, perhaps, those repositories of the records of the modern pharaohs.²⁴ Other classicists will have to mediate between these two substantial scholars. The rest of us should at least recognize that the path to unthinking anachronism is a broad one and resolve that the archival history of the future not be Whig history.

Second, archival history must be careful to avoid an exclusively "rationalist" view of recordmaking and recordkeeping. Following Thomas again, I strongly recommend her discussion of the rationalist and non-rationalist meanings of records.²⁵ This should be an important aspect of any future work in archival history. Because we are literate people, because we necessarily look for meaning in the contents of written documentation, we fall into the habit of supposing that records mean what

²⁴ Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), esp. 128-144; Ernst Posner, *Archives in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972).

²⁵ Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, 74-100.

the words in them mean. To be sure, this is quite often, probably even most often, the case, but records may also mean a great deal more. Sometimes the act of recordmaking is more significant than the record that is made. Sometimes the record is made in such a way as to render its use difficult or even impossible. Sometimes records are prized less for their contents than for their physical being and form, revered or hated as objects rather than as carriers of information.²⁶ Most archivists have in their collections (and in their personal possession) records that they value highly but that have almost no real usefulness, records that they never consult for the information they convey. How often do university presidents come to the archives, asking to read through the school's charter before taking a particular administrative action? And yet the archives keeps the charter, puts it on display, and drags it out to show distinguished visitors. How often do individuals consult their diplomas to find out how smart they are? And yet, they keep the diploma—they may even have it framed—and they have the photograph their mother took of the precise moment at which the dean handed it over.

Can archival history help us understand these impulses, these aspects of the ecology of records and their meaning in human affairs? It surely can, but only if we widen our angle of vision to include an understanding that records have meaning on a number of different levels of experience all at the same time. So by all means let us study, for

²⁶ I have argued this case more fully in "The Symbolic Significance of Archives," *American Archivist* 56 (Spring 1993), 234-255.

example, the origins of recordkeeping practices in particular historical times and places—the American colonies in the seventeenth century would be a good starting point—and not ask just what kinds of records were produced and how they were used; let us also ask what society's decisions to record that kind of information in those kinds of formats for those intended purposes tell us about all the parties to the transaction: society, the information, the records, and the larger social goals and values. We should study the history of archival principles and practices—ideas about reference service and expanding access, for instance—in an effort to describe what archivists thought they were doing, for whom they thought they were doing it, and why they thought it was important to do. We should study the changing historical fortunes of archival repositories, of particular archival collections and individual documents, to discover the complex of practical and emotional reasons people invested so much time, effort, and cash in them.

There is almost everything yet to be done and, as archival education programs continue to develop, there are more and more circumstances in which to do it. Student research in archival seminars, which should at least occasionally focus on archival history in addition to the usual topics, can be easily focused in this direction. Those few archival education programs which require a thesis should encourage at least some historical work under this rubric. There is no reason, for example, why we cannot build a fuller history of public and private archives and recordkeeping in each state: these would make ideal topics for theses. Archival educators, who still remain disappointingly unproductive scholars of their own

discipline, should likewise take archival history as a theme for at least some of their own research and publication. In an era in which we feel that there is little new to be said in many academic disciplines, the situation in this one is just the opposite. Let's—to use the contemporary phrase—just do it.

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